COPING STRATEGIES FOR CULTURE SHOCK AS INDICATORS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

When individuals relocate to an environment vastly different from their own, they often experience culture shock. Methods of coping with culture shock differ cross-culturally; by noting how people endure culture shock, one can determine how they form their cultural identity. Culture shock appears to be most common when the relocation occurs between a Western country and a third-world country, and for this reason research has been limited to Americans traveling to India, and Indians immigrating to the United States. Previous research by Anderson indicates that Americans tend to form their cultural identity based on memories and experiences, while Mehta et al., showed Indians use tangible possessions to maintain their sense of self. This difference can be attributed to the distinction between the two cultures.

Introduction

The concept of culture shock has been interpreted in a variety of ways, both by people who have experienced it and by anthropologists studying it. Most generally, culture shock can be defined as "the process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar environment" (Pedersen 1995, 1). Most, if not all, people who travel to a foreign country – whether for a temporary vacation or to make it their permanent residence – experience culture shock of some sort. Culture shock is common when one travels from a Western society to a third-world country, or vice versa. During the adjustment period that invariably follows relocation, coping strategies differ cross-culturally, and such differences reveal how different cultures form their identities. The goal of this research is to compare experiences of culture shock from the perspectives of two types of travelers: one

to, and one from, a third-world country. In order to make the analysis as specific as possible, the investigation has been restricted to focus on the nations of the United States and India. Understanding the adaptation required in order to cope with a new host culture can help one recognize the marked differences between two very different societies.

The term *culture shock* was coined by renowned anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in a speech he gave in Rio de Janeiro, later published as an article. In his speech, Dr. Oberg suggested that culture shock is experienced through three main stages. During these stages, initial ethnocentric thoughts eventually give way to a more culturally relativistic outlook. The first stage of culture shock is what Oberg calls the "Honeymoon Stage" (1960, 177). This phase takes place during the first few weeks in the host country, and is characterized by a fascination with the culture that is so vastly different from one's own. Individuals tend to associate with people who share their culture, and are polite and courteous to foreigners. For short visits – indeed, such as honeymoons – the experience never progresses past this stage. But for more permanent stays, one finds that the feeling of novelty wears off.

The second stage, referred to as the Negotiation (or Disintegration) Stage (Pedersen 1995, 79), begins once the individual realizes that he or she must live with his or her new culture. It is characterized by a "hostile and aggressive attitude" towards locals (Oberg 1960, 179). This stage is caused by all of one's difficulties collapsing upon them all at once: trouble in school, language barriers, difficulty shopping, etc. During this stage, one feels as if all his or her troubles are the result of locals trying to make life difficult for them; the phrase "it's all *their* fault" is common during this phase, and one may resort to false stereotypes to try and comfort himself. This stage is associated with the low point in the U-curve of adjustment to life transitions suggested by T.L. Coffman and M.C. Harris. According to their model, transitions such as cultural displacement

start at a high point, followed by a rapid downward slope. After reaching the bottom, the individual experiences a rise to a level comparable with his initial thoughts and feelings (1984), as demonstrated in the third stage of culture shock.

The third and final stage, the Adjustment Stage, is associated with recovery and a greater sense of cultural relativism. According to Oberg (1960), this stage begins when criticism from the Negotiation Stage turns into a sense of humor regarding their situation. The third stage is largely one of acceptance of one's circumstance. At this point the individual has grown accustomed to his or her new environment, and acceptance develops into enjoyment of the food, places, and people. At this point, if the individual were to return to his place of origin, he or she may experience what is known as *reverse culture shock*, or re-entry shock, after having grown so accustomed to his host culture (Oberg 1960, 180).

Reverse culture shock can be considered a fourth stage, and it occurs once an individual returns home and is overwhelmed (or underwhelmed, as the case may be) by the everyday life that he or she had previously taken for granted.

Americans Traveling to India

In 1971, anthropologist Barbara Gallatin Anderson wrote a paper in which she related the experiences of herself and 14 other American scholars when they participated in a culture-change experiment in India during the previous summer. In the opening paragraph, she makes the point of saying that “none of us escaped culture shock” (Anderson 1971, 1121). Anderson does not take the expected approach of delving into the difficulties she and the others experienced during their three-month program that caused her culture shock. Instead, she chooses to analyze how the team slowly adapted to the sudden change in surroundings via explanation of dreams experienced during each of Oberg's three stages of culture shock. She

noted that the dreams the scholars had were similar, and changed as they adjusted more and more to their environment.

During the first days and weeks of the study (corresponding with Oberg's Honeymoon Stage), the scholars discovered that they were not dreaming of those they left behind: not friends, colleagues, or even family. Instead, they found themselves dreaming of memories far into their past, such as childhood friends and old neighborhoods in their hometowns. Family and friends did not make an appearance in dreams until the second phase (the Negotiation Stage), and when they did they were distant. One professor dreamed of speaking with his wife, “from the doorway” (1122). Another dreamt about lunch with a colleague, but the large size of the table made conversation difficult. Also in this phase, participants noted having dreams about Indians doing things that were decidedly American, such as playing cards, smoking, and speaking with perfect American accents. In this regard, there seemed to be a blending of Indian and American cultures. Overall, it became clear that the coping strategies relied upon by the American scholars focused primarily on memories of their homeland, and that Americans tend to use experiences as the basis of their identities (Anderson 1971).

Anderson wrote that in the third phase, there was a clear division between the cultures, as people began to have dreams in which “Americans were Americans and Indians were Indians” (1971, 1122). She suggests that the reason for the initial dreams was that the scholars needed something from their past they could remain anchored to, that was unaffected by the trip to India. While past childhood friends could not be affected by the trip, current marital and friendship ties that were (temporarily) broken up by the study were more likely to be pushed to the back of their minds. When the time came to return home at the program's conclusion, the scholars experienced

reverse culture shock as they grew concerned about needing to go back into the “rat race” and began to long for “their India” (Anderson 1971, 1124).

Indians Immigrating to America

A 1991 study conducted by Raj Mehta, an assistant Marketing professor at the University of Cincinnati, focused primarily on Indian immigration to the United States, and how Indians try to maintain their cultural identity even when they are far from home. Basing his information on heavy research, Mehta states that physical possessions often play a large role in the cultural identity of Indian immigrants (1991, 398).

Families with objects that express their identities tend to bring them when they move, in order to “transport” their former identities into the household of their new one. Such objects are typically placed within the new home in order to ease the transitions between cultures. Installing these transition objects in the new home help to personalize it. Said one immigrant: “Slowly it is becoming our house. With each new coat of paint, each box unpacked, each tile set into place, we begin to feel our presence in its past . . . We treat the house, the house which is slowly becoming ours, with some respect. We, after all, have moved into it . . . We renovate, renew this structure, make changes. Slowly it is becoming ours” (Mehta 1991, 399). Surely, personalizing one's home with transitional objects ties the home to one's cultural identity.

Just as maintaining possessions from home defines an Indian immigrant's cultural identity, so does the appropriation of American possessions. When an individual relocates into a new culture, it can be difficult to maintain every part of his former culture, and he often find himself adopting American items in addition to his Indian objects. This action represents the mixing of American and Indian cultures, and shows that the individual is somewhere between

stages two and three of Kalervo Oberg's classic model of culture shock. This also indicates that the immigrant's integration into American culture has begun (Mehta 1991, 401).

Discussion

The experiences associated with culture shock are due primarily to the differences between an individual's home culture and his host culture. Language barriers and differing customs and social norms can make a traveler feel lost and alienated. It is no surprise that when every aspect of life for an individual is completely changed, he has trouble adjusting to his new surroundings – in short, culture shock results when one is simply not used to his environment. The United States and India are no exception to this, and the two societies differ largely in many aspects.

One of the main differences between the two societies is the difference in social structure. Americans have the ability to climb the social ladder through hard work and determination. As a result, the social statuses of Americans are largely achieved. Meanwhile, India is a society that is strictly stratified according to the varna/jati system. This separates different classes based on birth rather than achievement, and as such social statuses are ascribed. Indian society is rigid, and mobility is nearly impossible. The harsh inequalities caused by this system results in a large proportion of the population living below the international poverty line – approximately 42 percent according to a recent press release by the World Bank (2008), about four times as much as in the United States. With such a large number of impoverished people living in India, living conditions across much of the country are abominable in comparison to conditions in the United States, and such conditions make the transition difficult for American immigrants.

The United States and India also vary largely in their primary religions. The United States' religious makeup is largely Judeo-Christian, with around 80 percent of Americans

practicing either the Jewish or Christian faiths (Pew 2007). Indeed, the very nation itself was founded upon Judeo-Christian ideals, with early American law based heavily on parts of *The Old Testament* such as the Commandments. The primary language of these groups in the United States is English, and although there is no official national language, 30 of the 50 states have adopted English as an official language. Most of the major sacred days in the Judeo-Christian faiths are federally recognized holidays, and on these days government institutions are closed regardless of the religions of their employees.

On the other hand, the religious makeup of India is largely Hindu. 80 percent of the Indian population practices Hinduism (Census 2001). Just as the Judeo-Christian faiths played a large role in the formation of the American state, Hinduism played a powerful role in the shaping of early Indian history. Indeed, the caste system that still exists in Indian society can trace its roots to the four-varna system of Hinduism: the brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas, and shudras. The most-spoken language in India is Hindi, with approximately half of the populations as speakers. Of all the nationally recognized festivals in India, by far the most are from the Hindu faith. Such festivals are much more elaborate than holidays in the United States, with dancing, singing, and worship of the different Hindu deities.

A third major difference between the two societies is the cuisine. Because the United States is a “melting pot” of hundreds of cultures from around the world, Americans have an impressive choice of delicacies from nearly every country imaginable, from Argentina to Thailand to Greece. Of course, due to assimilation and globalization the dividing lines between the cuisines have blurred somewhat to create a new, “American” cuisine (a number of Chinese restaurants in the United States offer french fries), but generally there is still enough differentiation to maintain diversity.

India is not nearly as much of a melting pot as America is; immigration to the United States is high and more or less constant, while there is much less immigration to India. The reason for this could be the vision of America as the “land of opportunity,” and indeed it is for this reason that many choose to relocate to the United States. Due to the small trickle of immigration, Indian culture is not as susceptible to change, and cuisine remains “Indian.” Americans who have grown accustomed to their melting pot of cuisine may find it difficult to find food they enjoy in India, especially due to the widespread, extensive use of spices, herbs and vegetables that Westerners might not be able to handle.

These three main aspects are only a tiny fraction of all the differences between the United States and India. One could fill volumes with every minute detail and nuance of the norms in each culture, what actions are appropriate in different situations, and how history shapes the social, political, and economic climates in both nations. It is for these reasons that an individual would be affected by culture shock differently depending on the culture he came from.

Possibly the reason Indian immigrants tend to rely on objects to ease the transition is because the society they are used to is more traditional than the one they are joining. American society is generally very materialistic, fast-paced, and places a strong emphasis on the buildup of personal wealth. Strong criticism of this type of lifestyle may lead Indians to want to bring something to remind them of simpler times, when life wasn't so full of hustle-and-bustle and family was the priority. Perhaps, without these transitional objects, Western society would completely overwhelm immigrants into an extreme state of culture shock.

Conclusion

Certainly, all experiences of culture shock are different. There is no set path that everyone necessarily adheres to strictly, following cultural displacement. The two examples

discussed earlier are merely two possibilities out of countless others. However, travelers generally tend to follow the three stages of culture shock put forth by Kalervo Oberg, as well as Coffman and Harris' U-curve model.

Because experiences of culture shock differ cross-culturally, the coping strategies used in situations of culture shock differ accordingly. Generally, by observing the coping strategies that individuals use in cultures so vastly different from their own, it can be determined how these cultures maintain a sense of self-identity. In the case of Barbara Gallatin Anderson's study in India, the American scholars held on to their American values by remembering important events, people, and places from their childhood. Meanwhile, Raj Mehta's study revealed that Indian immigrants use possessions from home to represent their cultural identities, and to remind them of home when in a foreign country such as the United States. Each culture has their own way of self-identifying as a result of socioeconomic conditions, and American and Indian cultures are no different.

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